

Dear Baroness Ashton,

Dear Nabil al Arabi, Secretary General of the League of Arab States,

Let me begin by thanking you for the excellent organisation of our meeting. I want to also particularly highlight the role of our host country -- Egypt, and express our gratitude for their hospitality.

This is the second meeting between the foreign ministers of the EU and the LAS and it has been in preparation for some time. I believe it is time to highlight our growing relationship and interdependence by institutionalizing our dialogue at a higher level. In the future we should have a Summit between the heads of state and government of our countries.

I would like to briefly speak about Syria.

More than 19 months ago I visited president Bashar al-Assad in *Tishreen Palace*, being the last EU Minister to see him after the protests had erupted. I told him that there is “a brave new world” taking shape out there, sweeping away rulers like him. I explained why Syria wouldn’t be passed by, and why he should immediately commence and lead a brave reform process to address his people’s legitimate anxieties and needs. As we all know he did not heed that advice. Now, it is evident that by the time I was talking to him he was harboring a very different agenda on his mind: one that had perhaps worked back in 1982 – with his father and uncle, yet one that has proven useless, bloody and obsolete today.

*What went wrong* – is the question that we need to address in retrospect; and *what is to be done* – is what we need to discuss today. What went wrong is that instead of reform,

Assad responded with what he called “the security solution”. Ominous, gruesome and deadly effective perhaps in the 80s, it is not only useless, but very dangerous today. After the “Arab Awakening” such action may only stir people’s rage and make them strive ever more eagerly to restore their trampled dignity and hijacked freedom.

Wondering *what is to be done*, however, leads us to the recognition of a moral failure: a failure by all of us. A whole people – regardless of ethnic, religious or tribal affiliation – has been laid on the altar of power politics and interests. The interests of those of a tiny ruling clique that wields power with complete disregard of human life and dignity, being backed by a minority of regional and global powers.

We have good news on the horizon. In Doha, where we have been urging different stripes of the Syrian opposition to stand united, we have seen good results – the formation of National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary Opposition forces is a very important step and the beginning of a relentless process of consolidation of the Syrian opposition. It should remain open to all representatives of Syrian society. The challenge is for the National Coalition to become a unifying political framework. It is to that end that end the European Union and the Arab League must do our utmost to help them. This will create a mechanism for coordination but also provide us with an important channel of support to the future of Syria after the end of the dictatorship.

The Syrian people and the international community have high hopes for the National Coalition. The opposition groups have responded to our calls to unity – they have met numerous times in Cairo, in Doha, in Istanbul, in Paris, in Sofia, in Rome and elsewhere.

Two days ago, in Doha they reached vital agreement and now it is our turn to deliver.

To support their efforts in agreeing on how to implement what has been agreed under the auspices of the Arab League on political transition and the design of a national project for Syria.

To help them establish a transparent and effective system for the distribution of international material aid.

To work with them on advancing the principles of tolerance, mutual respect and national reconciliation in a country whose ethnic and religious diversity should above all be preserved.

The key to stop the conflict in Syria is not in striking regional or international balances, in tactical maneuvering, or political bargaining. It was, is, and will always be *a moral issue*, one that we are indebted to resolve since it is long overdue. A long time ago, Martin Luther King Jr. introduced the need to react swiftly and immediately, he called it “a fierce urgency of now”. We have *fierce urgency of now* in Syria.

There are several conditions that can be met to achieve a solution in Syria:

1. President Assad and his entourage have no place whatsoever in the transitional political arrangement;
2. an urgent formula of transition needs to be designed - a mechanism combining figures from opposition and some of the regime with no blood on their hands;
3. military activities need to be stopped – particularly on the side of the army and the paramilitary *shabbiha*, but that is also valid for all forces on the ground;
4. a process of genuine reconciliation should be launched;
5. and last, but not least, those responsible for the crimes committed by the regime must face justice.

We cannot prolong the current state of affairs: if so, we will not pass the test of History.

Dear colleagues,

Back in 1989 Central and Eastern Europe was at the footsteps of change. Naysayers from the both sides of the Atlantic were telling us that “the Easterners”, “the Slavs” or Orthodox Christians were not fit for democracy and open market economy. They were telling us that after having lived for many years under autocratic rule, we would be unable to build democratic and open societies. Yet, we saw how regimes that seemed set in stone collapsed like paper tigers. These critics were proven wrong by history. 23 years later the foundations of democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights are rock-solid in Central and Eastern Europe. This has happened in our region.

This can and will happen in the Arab world as well!

The principles of democracy, freedom, justice and human rights are universal values. They are not the “intellectual property” to a peculiar people, race, society or religion but they are a legacy that we all share.

Today we speak of Human Rights. Yet, if we look at the Holy Scriptures of our religions, we will see that these values are there -- individual dignity is the centre of the Divine plan and attention of all monotheistic traditions.

This is why Bulgaria has supported the Arab awaking and will continue to support it by developing tools for us to exchange ideas and to share lessons learned from the transition in Central and Eastern Europe with our friends in the Arab world. This is why we established the Sofia Platform.

This is why we supported *the Tunisian School of Politics* modeled on the Bulgarian School of Politics where newly elected politicians are being trained in how to deal with intricacies of democratic governance.

All things considered, there is a great part of common heritage throughout history, between the Oxidant and the Orient, between Christendom and *Dar-ul-Islam*, between the Arab world and the West. What binds us is far stronger than what divides us one. The differences between us are nothing but parts of a mosaic that glimmers and glitters with the beauty of rich cultures and traditions. This is why I believe that our meeting today is very important and underlines the fact that we live in a common world and we are bound by friendship and understanding that we must build on.

Thank you.